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WWII Spies' Grab Bag of Dirty Tricks

If the Smithsonian Institution is looking for a sure-fire exhibit to interest visitors, it couldn't do better than to borrow the Central Intelligence Agency historical "dirty tricks" collection now under lock and key at the agency's headquarters in Langley.

The display would bear a sort of perverse resemblance to the show window of a Times Square joke shop. But instead of rib-tickling whoopie cushions, joy buzzers and fake ink stains, the fiendish devices developed for the Office of Strategic Services during World War II were deadly serious. They were designed to commit murder and mayhem behind enemy lines or otherwise help OSS agents carry out their dangerous spying and sabotage missions.

Here are some examples, either from the CIA collection or as described graphically in a yellowing copy of "OSS Weapons," a manual produced in June 1944, just as Allied troops were invading Normandy:

- The "Dog Drag" was a device that deposited a "persistent aromatic" scent when dragged behind an agent "to throw trained dogs off the scent of their quarry." The drag kit "can be particularly useful in disguising the operator's trail to a hidden storage point or other revisited spot." The device would presumably discombobulate Nazi bloodhounds without burning their sensitive sniffers as the British-favored hot-pepper trick did.

- Explosives and incendiaries for use against people and inanimate objects were disguised as

harmless, everyday objects. "Some were made to resemble chunks of coal and logs—with startling results when an Axis soldier placed them in a roaring fire," one description notes, adding: "Others were made to look like animal droppings and were used as land mines."

- "Capsule H" was a sort of delayed-action Molotov cocktail, consisting of a small plastic capsule filled with powdered sugar, a chemical and buckshot (for weight). It was usually placed in a bottle filled with sulfuric acid and gasoline. The acid would eat through the plastic in about two hours, "igniting the powders with a brief hot flame," bursting the bottle and spreading the burning gasoline.

- The "Caccolube" was a simple but effective device used to disable an enemy vehicle. It was a condom filled with an abrasive compound, and was dropped into an engine crankcase. "After the engine heats up," the OSS manual explained, "the hot oil will deteriorate the rubber sac and free the compound into the lubricating system."

"When circulated through this system, the compound fuses and welds the moving metal parts of the machinery. Slipped into a truck, the Caccolube takes effect after the truck has been driven from 30 to 50 miles. It reacts so thoroughly on pistons, cylinder walls and bearing journals that the vehicle is not only thrown out of service but the engine is destroyed beyond repair."

This lethal "lube job" replaced the original effort using sugar, when it was discovered that sugar actually promoted better engine performance in the vehicles of that era.